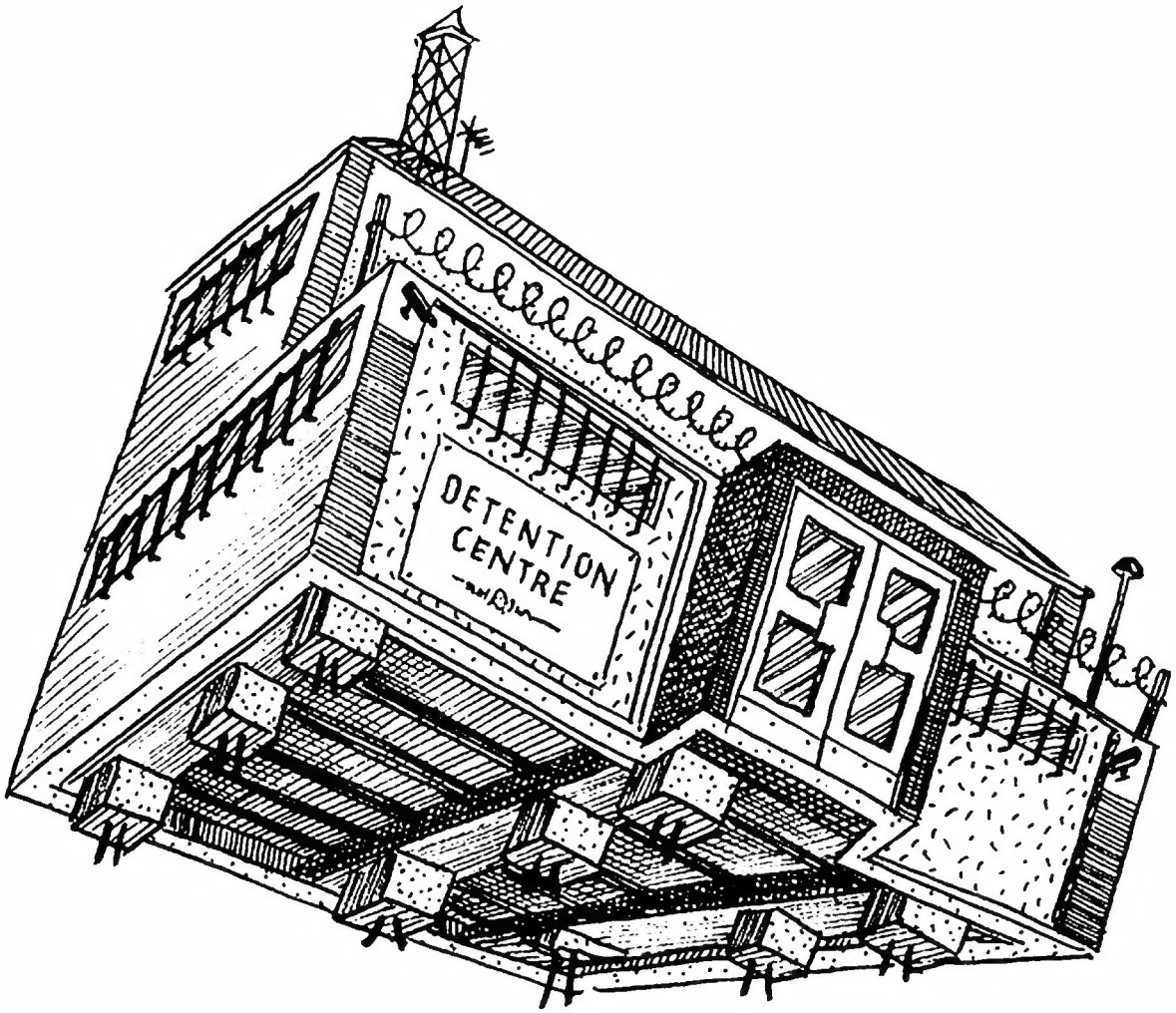
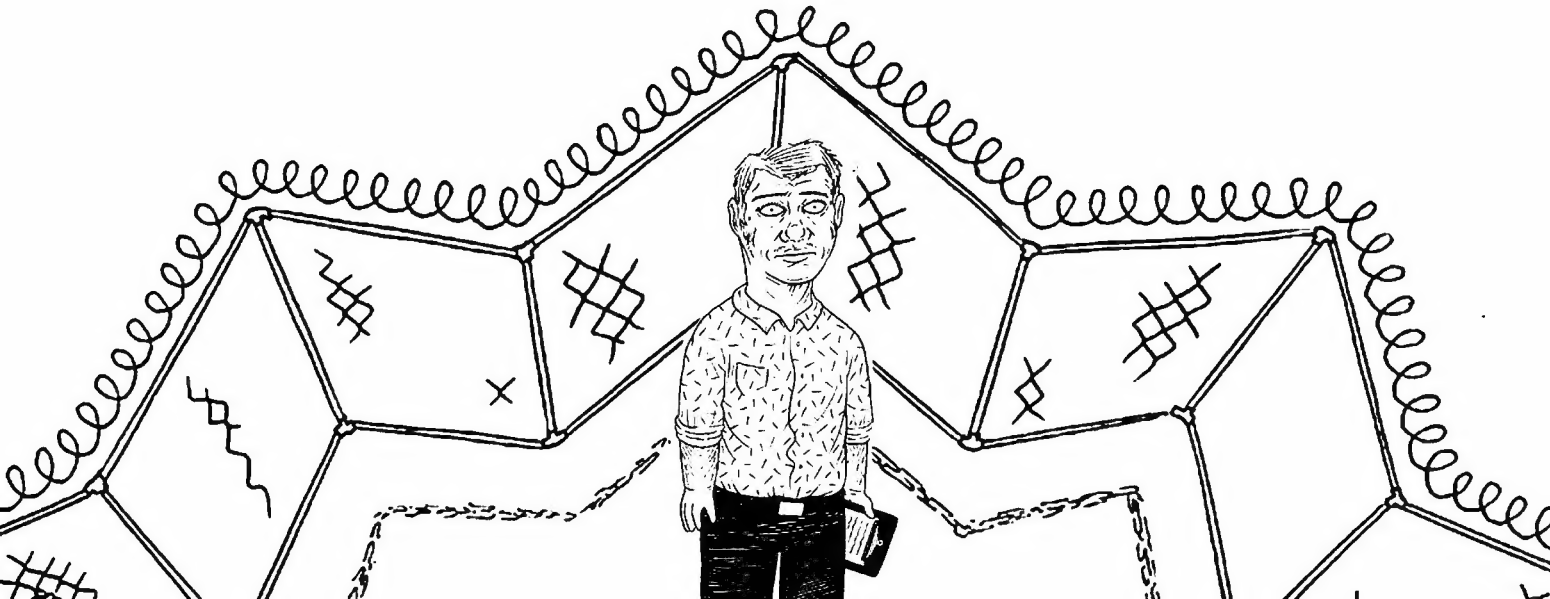
at work inside our detention centres: a guard's story





At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard's Story

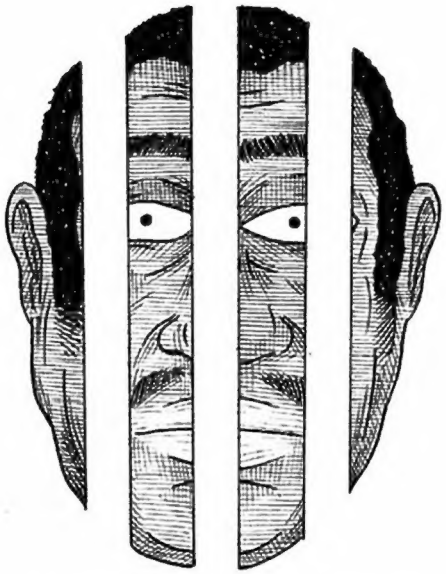
This is a first-hand account of life inside an Australian immigration detention facility, told from the perspective of a former employee of Serco, the ubiquitous multinational service provider that runs the nation's onshore centres.

Realised in a comic-book style and drawn from exclusive interviews and diary entries from the ex-employee, A Guard's Story offers rare insight into how Australia's outsourced detention facilities are run.

Like all Serco employees, our informant signed a confidentiality agreement and has taken a significant personal risk by talking to us.

Prior to being employed by Serco, our source was sympathetic to the plight of asylum seekers in Australia's detention facilities and took on a job as a "client support worker" to try to help people from inside the system.

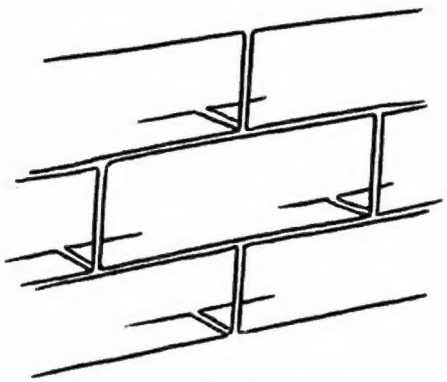
What follows is our source's experience, illustrated.



I ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD
THAT INDEFINITE DETENTION
DID TERRIBLE THINGS TO PEOPLE.

I THOUGHT, WELL,
THE SYSTEM EXISTS,

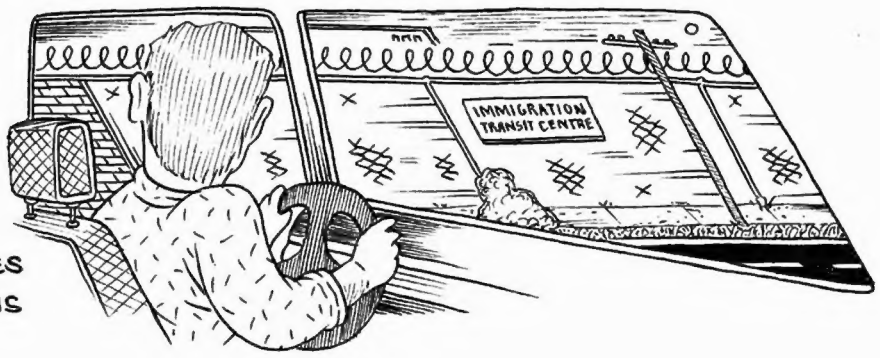
I'M NOT IN POLITICS

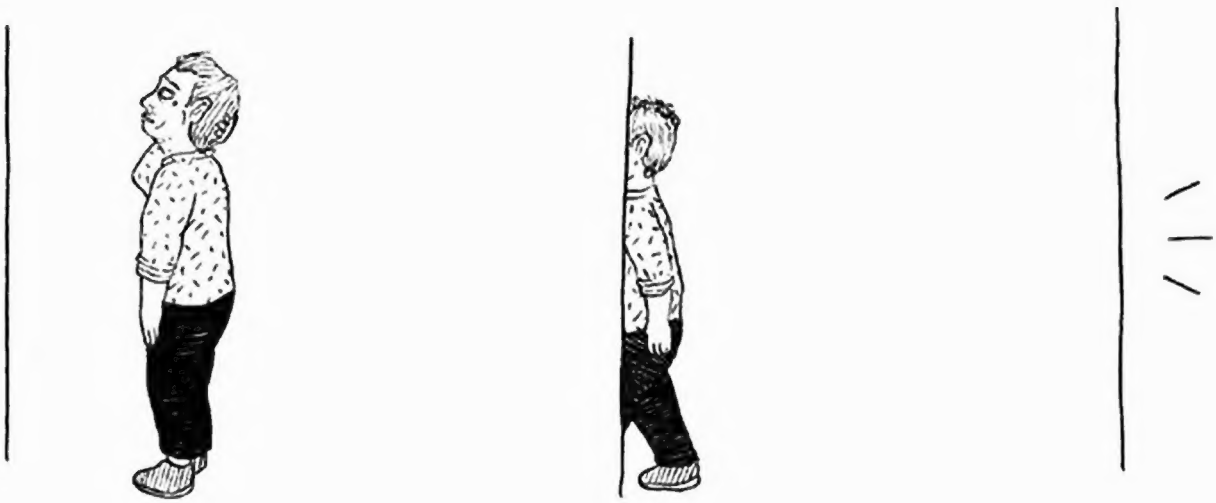


THERE'S NOTHING
I CAN DO ABOUT IT

SO MAYBE THE BEST
WAY TO SUPPORT PEOPLE
WHO ARE IN DETENTION
IS TO WORK INSIDE
THE SYSTEM

AND THE ONLY WAY YOU CAN WORK IN DETENTION CENTRES IN AUSTRALIA IS TO WORK FOR THIS COMPANY CALLED SERCO.





SO THAT'S WHAT I DID.

serco

Bringing service to life

SERCO IS A MULTINATIONAL SERVICES COMPANY THAT DOES EVERYTHING FROM MANAGING THE UK'S ATOMIC WEAPONS ESTABLISHMENT TO INSTALLING SPEED CAMERAS IN BAHRAIN.

AND IT'S RESPONSIBLE FOR RUNNING ALL OF THE IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTRES ON THE AUSTRALIAN MAINLAND.

I'M HERE TO APPLY FOR –

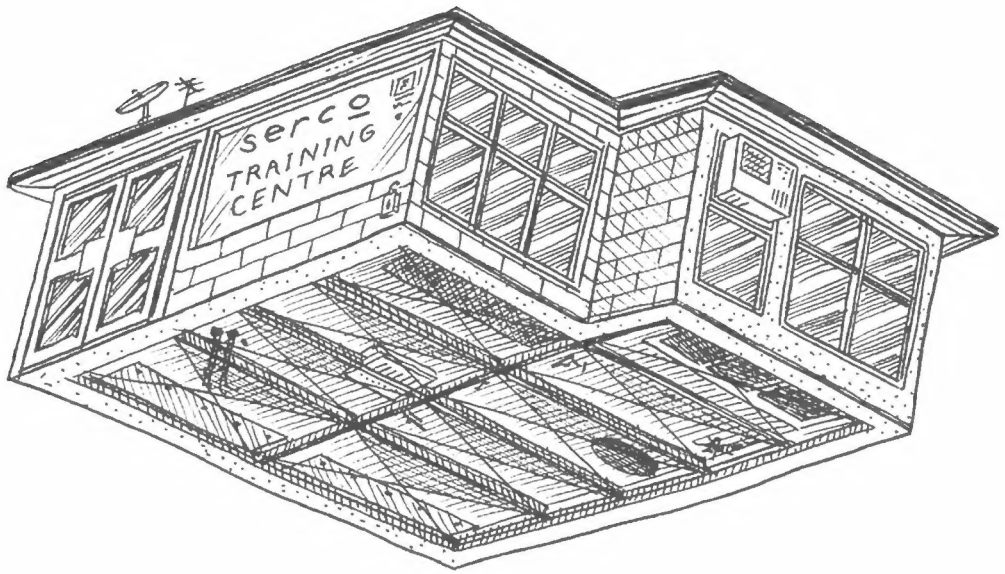
RESUME

YOU'RE HIRED

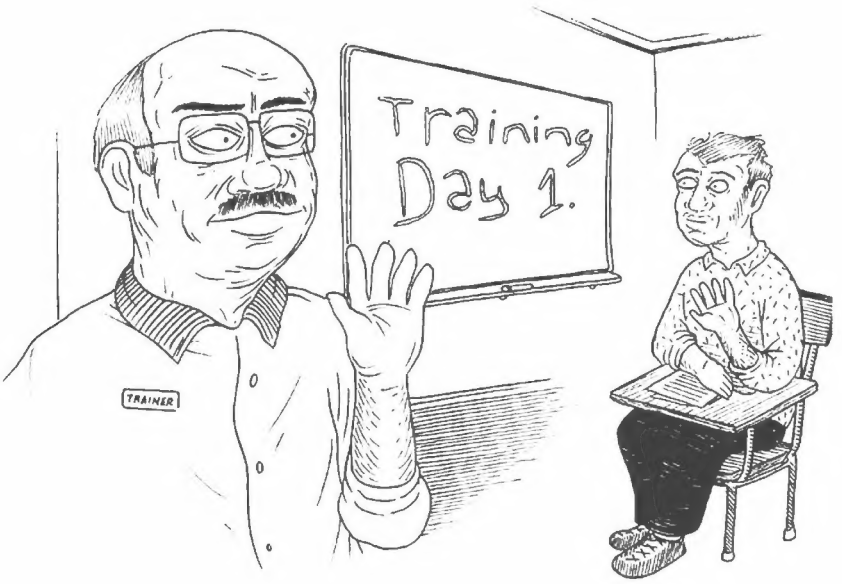
IT'S NOT HARD TO GET A JOB WITH SERCO.

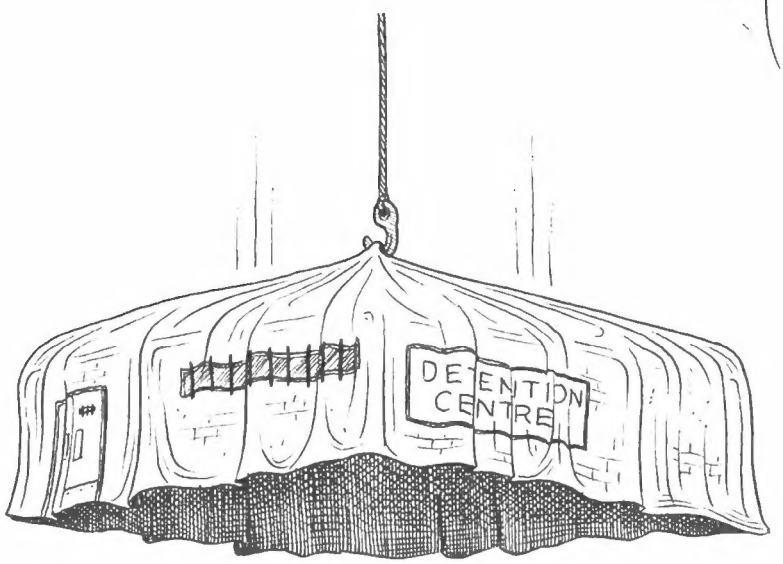
THEY HIRE PEOPLE QUICKLY AND IN BIG GROUPS

YOU DON'T HAVE TO HAVE QUALIFICATIONS OR ANYTHING.

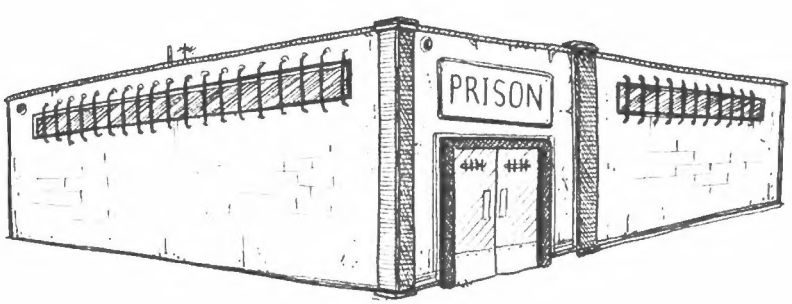


THIS GUY CAME IN AND INTRODUCED HIMSELF AS OUR TRAINER.





HIS LAST JOB WAS IN THE PRISON SYSTEM.

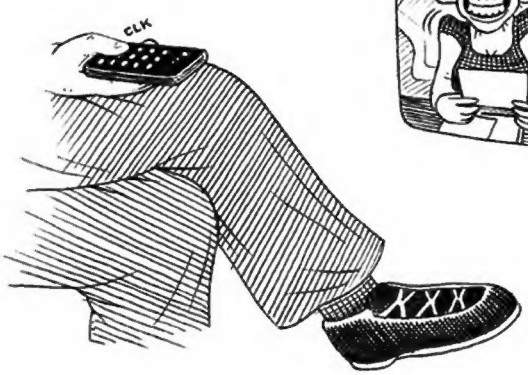


HE TOLD US:

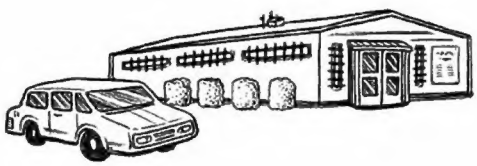
"THE ONLY THING THAT'S DIFFERENT IS THE CLOTHES WE LET THEM WEAR."

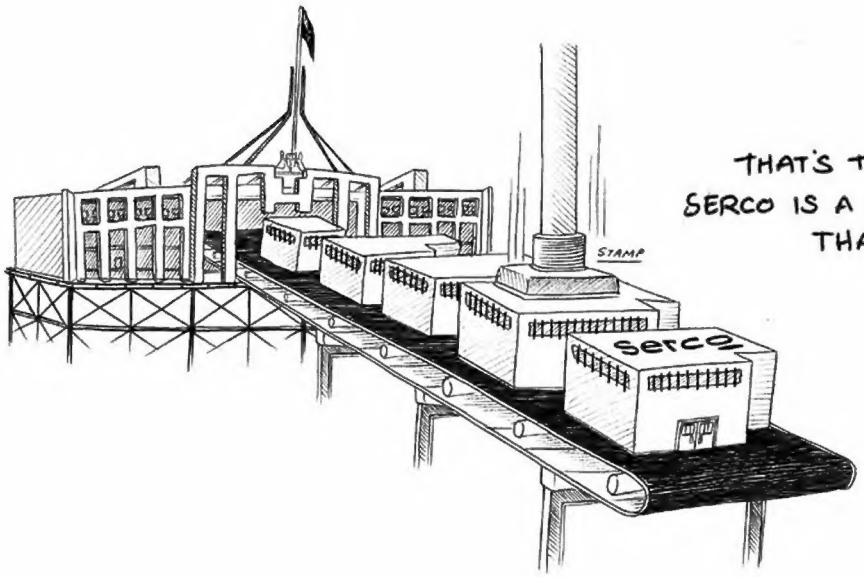
THE DEPARTMENT WANTS US
TO CALL THEM CLIENTS
SO WE CALL THEM CLIENTS.

"IF THEY TOLD US
TO CALL THEM HAMSTERS
WE'D CALL THEM HAMSTERS"



BUT WE KNOW THAT
THEY'RE DETAINEES.



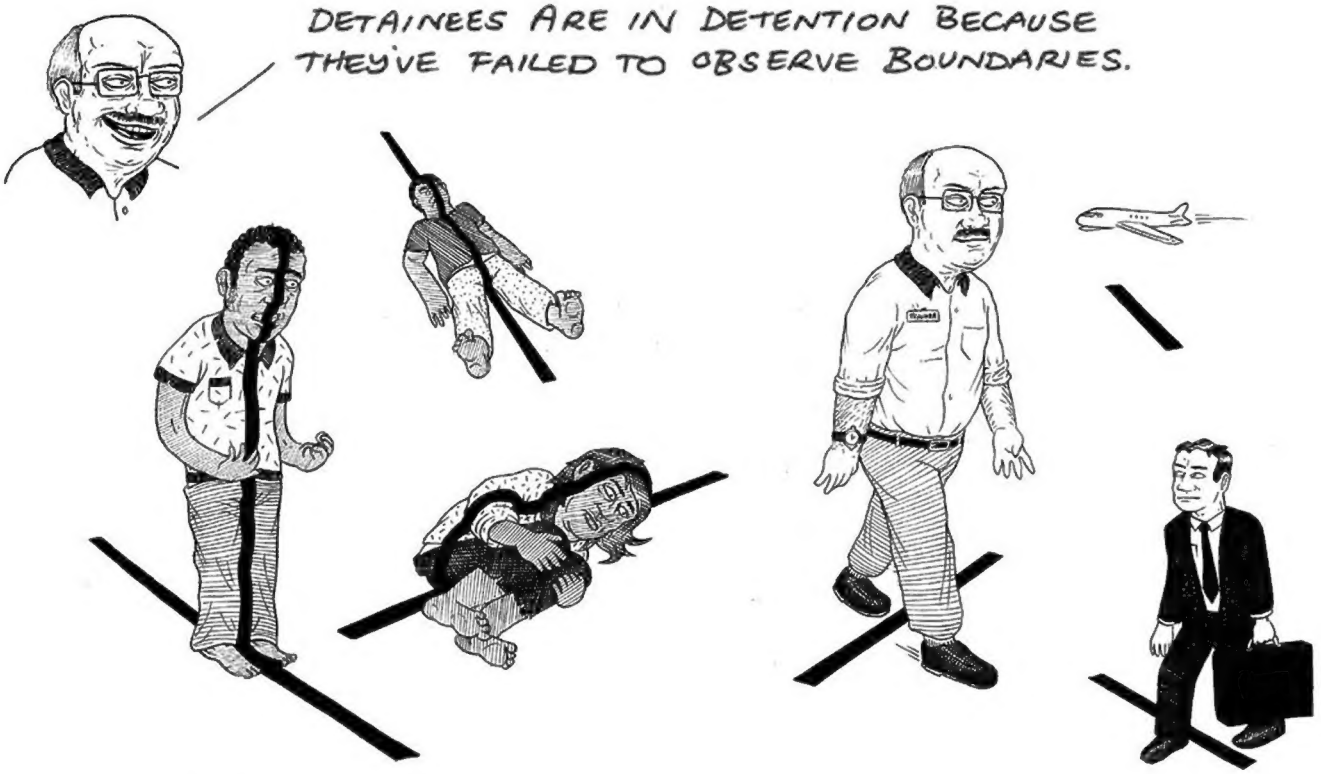


THAT'S THE THING ABOUT THIS PLACE.
SERCO IS A COMPANY THAT RUNS PRISONS.
THAT'S WHAT THEY DO.

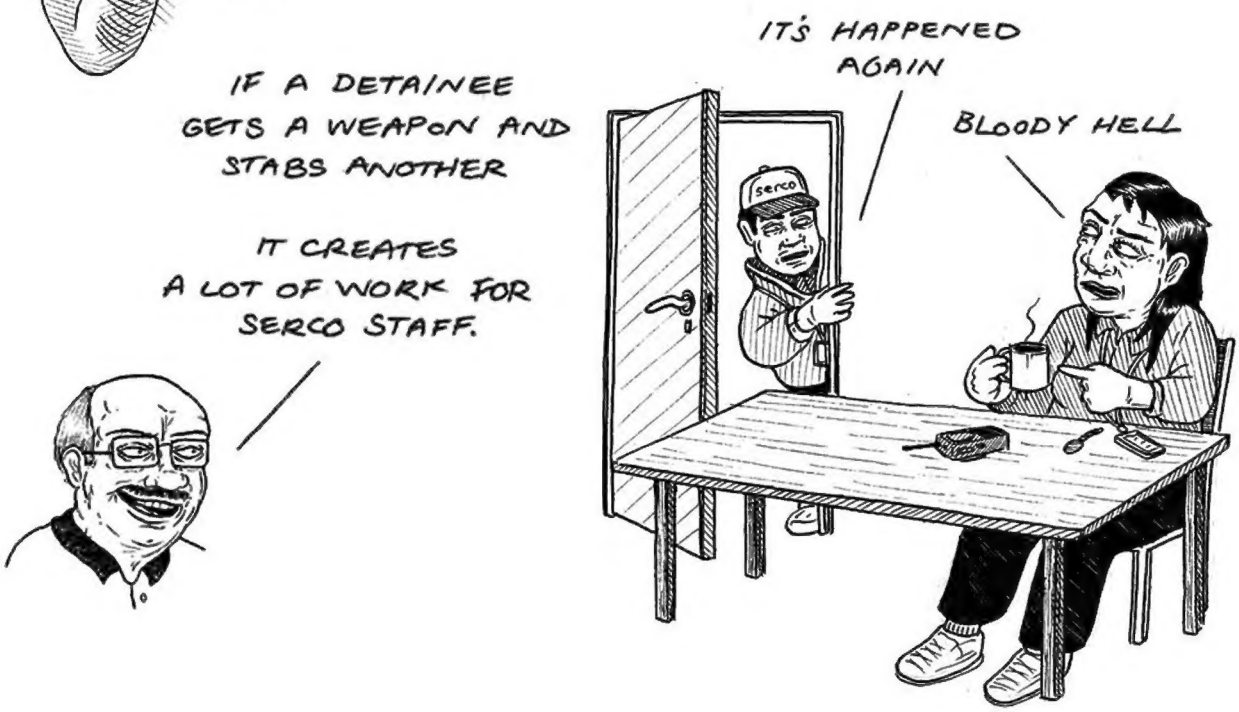
DETENTION IS PART OF
AUSTRALIA'S BORDER PROTECTION.

IF WE DIDNT PROTECT OUR BORDERS
WE'D HAVE A MASSIVE FLOW OF PEOPLE
INTO THE COUNTRY AND OUR
QUALITY OF LIFE WOULD DECLINE.

IT WAS CLEAR FROM THE FIRST DAY
OF TRAINING WHAT KIND OF CULTURE
THEY WERE TRYING TO FOSTER
AMONG THEIR EMPLOYEES.


DETAINEES ARE IN DETENTION BECAUSE THEY'VE FAILED TO OBSERVE BOUNDARIES.

THE TRAINER TOLD US TO BE CAREFUL GIVING OUT RAZORS.


IF A DETAINEE GETS A WEAPON AND STABS ANOTHER
IT CREATES A LOT OF WORK FOR SERCO STAFF.
IT'S HAPPENED AGAIN
BLOODY HELL
serco

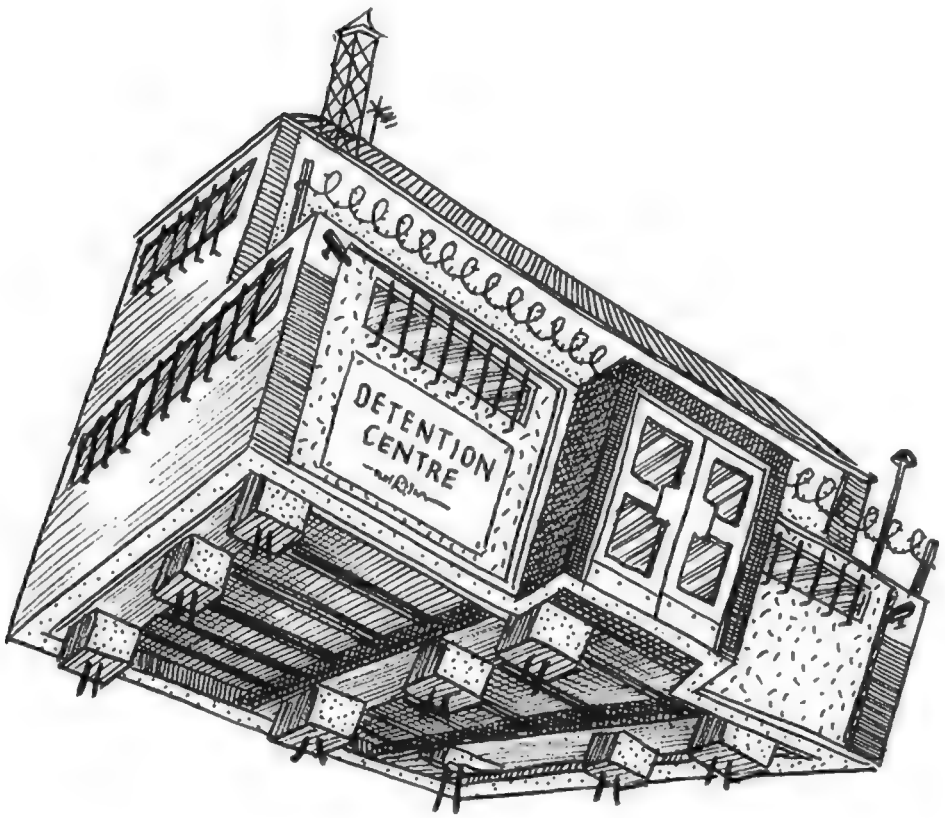
I REMEMBER ONE DAY
THEY WERE TEACHING US HOW
TO PHYSICALLY RESTRAIN PEOPLE.
IT WAS LIKE A ROLE PLAY.
I VOLUNTEERED.

AS IT WAS HAPPENING
AND THE 'OFFICERS'
WERE RESTRAINING ME
SITTING ON TOP OF ME
AND SQUEEZING MY
PRESSURE POINTS

I COULDN'T HANDLE IT

I KEPT
HAVING TO DISAPPEAR
OUT OF THE ROOM.

WHEN TRAINING WAS OVER
THEY SENT US OUT TO WORK
IN DETENTION CENTRES.

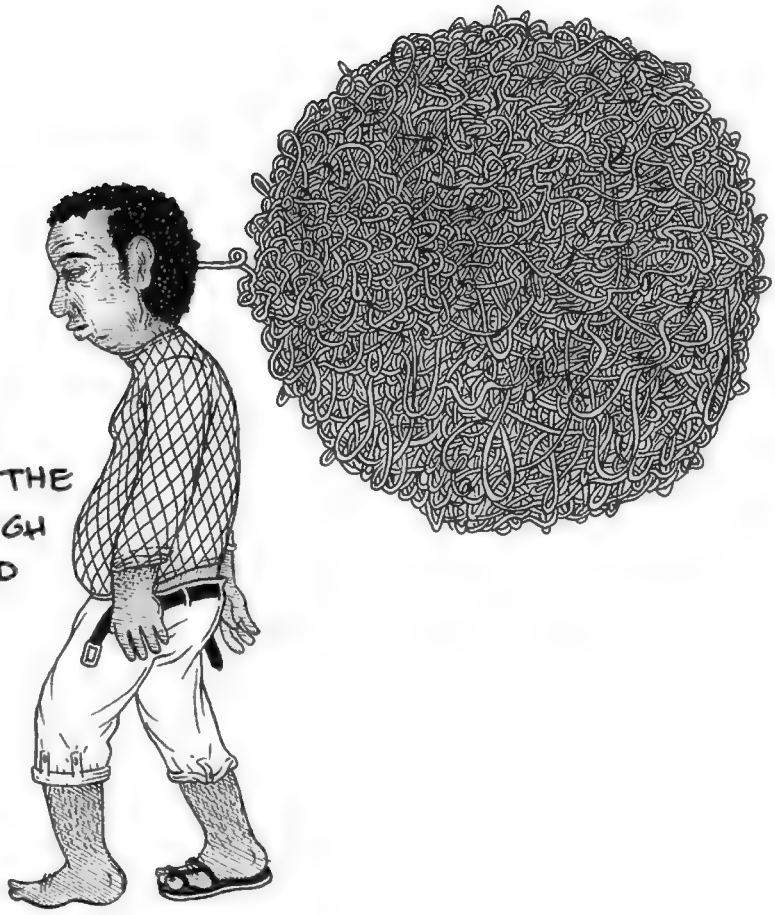


MY CO-WORKERS
WERE GOOD PEOPLE

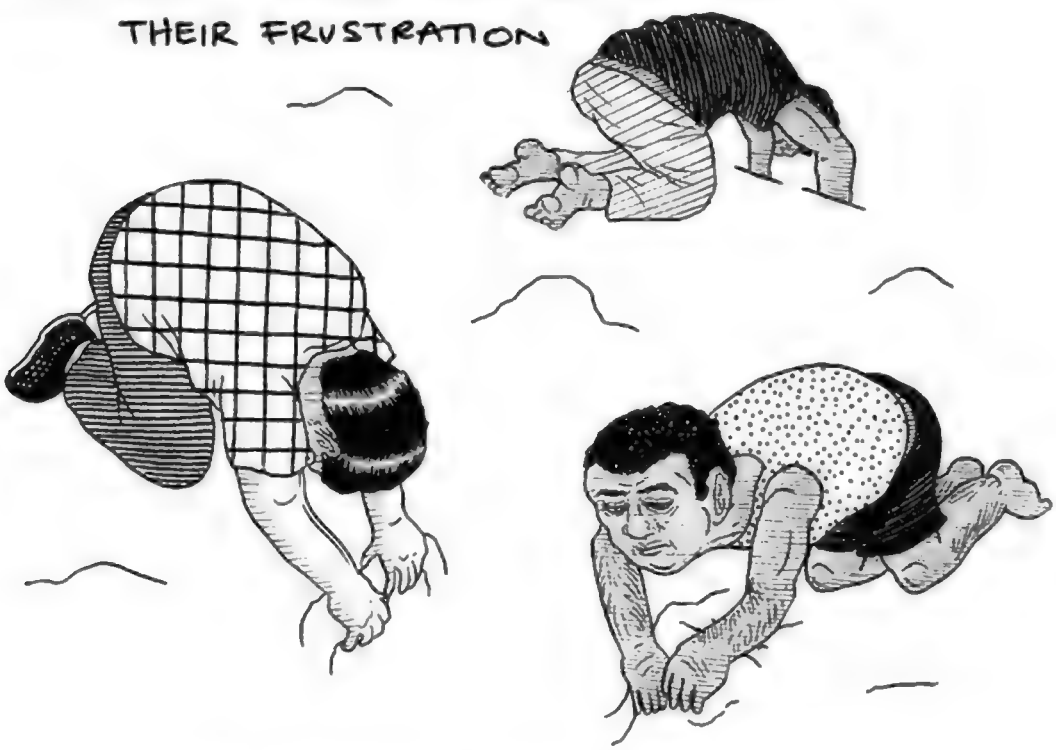
BUT TO BE ABLE
TO SLEEP AT NIGHT

THEY HAD TO
CONVINCE THEMSELVES THAT THE
PEOPLE THEY WERE GUARDING
WERE DANGEROUS

NONE OF THE SERCO STAFF HAD ANY UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THE PEOPLE HAD BEEN THROUGH BEFORE THEY ARRIVED IN AUSTRALIA.

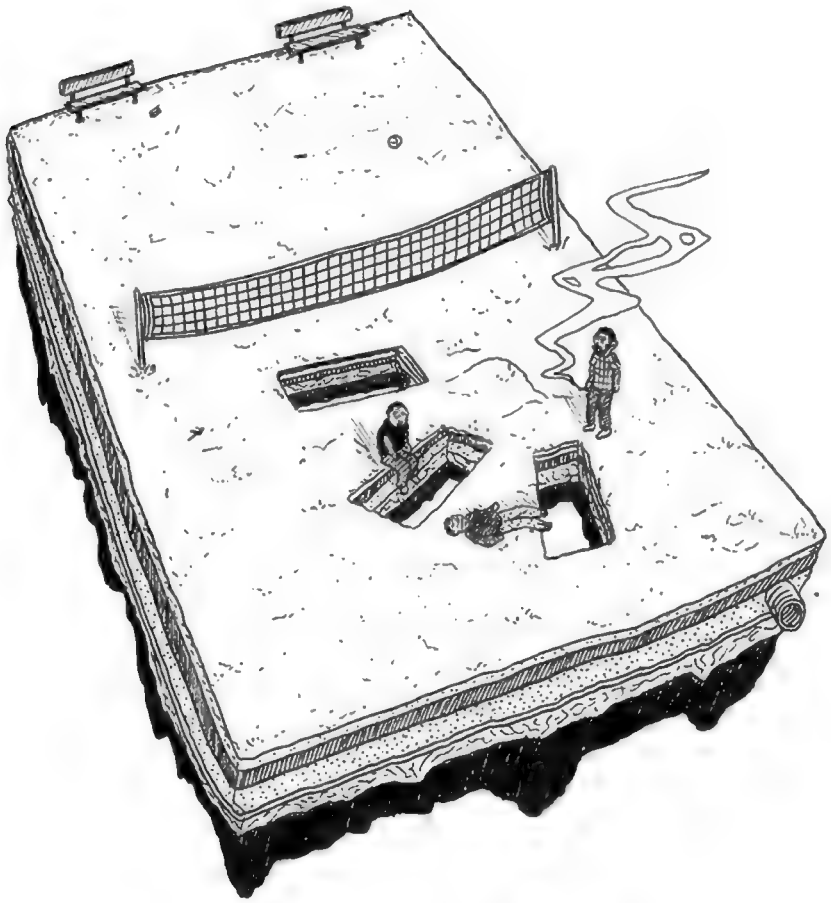


THE DETAINEES DID CRAZY THINGS TO EXPRESS THEIR FRUSTRATION



I REMEMBER THIS ONE OCCASION WHERE SOME OF THE GUYS DECIDED TO DIG THEMSELVES GRAVES IN ONE OF THE COMMON AREAS.

YOU HAD TO WALK PAST IT EVERY DAY.

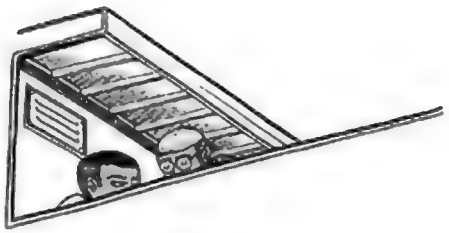


I THINK IT WAS A
VOLLEYBALL COURT OR SOMETHING

ANOTHER TIME
THERE WERE THESE
TWO ROHINGYAN GUYS
ON THE ROOF

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG
THEY WERE THERE FOR

YOU COULD SEE THEM
SQUATTING UNDER
THE EAVES



WE WERE TOLD
NOT TO LOOK AT THEM
OR SPEAK TO THEM

TO PRETEND THEY
WEREN'T THERE

I USED TO LOOK UP AND WAVE AT THEM WHEN NO-ONE WAS LOOKING
THEY WAVED BACK BUT THEY NEVER SMILED

ONE DAY, THERE WAS AN EMERGENCY CODE ON THE RADIO

I WALKED AROUND A CORNER

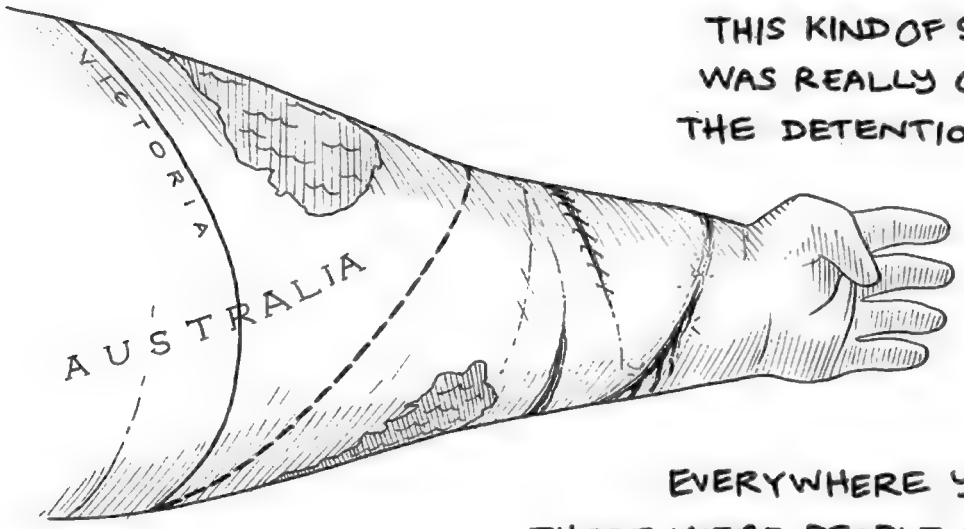
AND THERE WAS A GUY WITH A WHOLE BUNCH OF BROKEN GLASS IN HIS MOUTH

HE SAID HE WOULD SWALLOW IT IF WE DIDN'T MEET HIS DEMANDS.

HIS DEMANDS WEREN'T MUCH

FROM MEMORY, ALL HE WANTED WAS TO SEE HIS CASE MANAGER

THE SERCO OFFICERS TOLD ME TO KEEP WALKING.

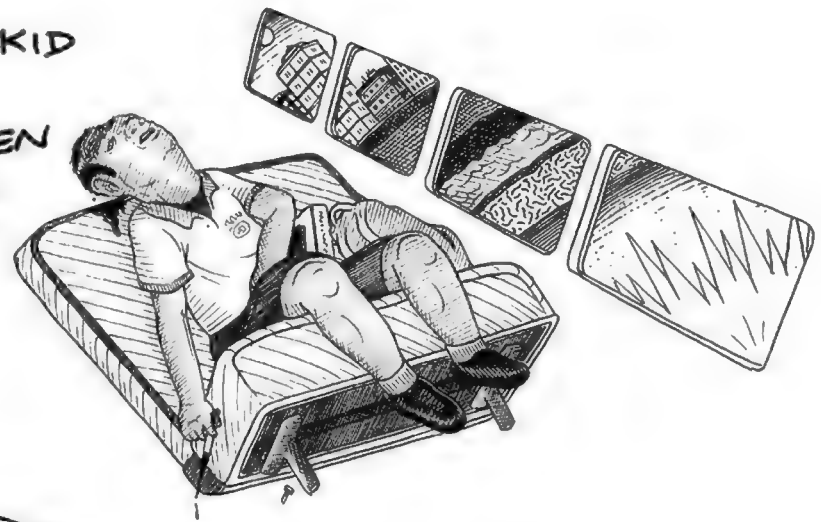


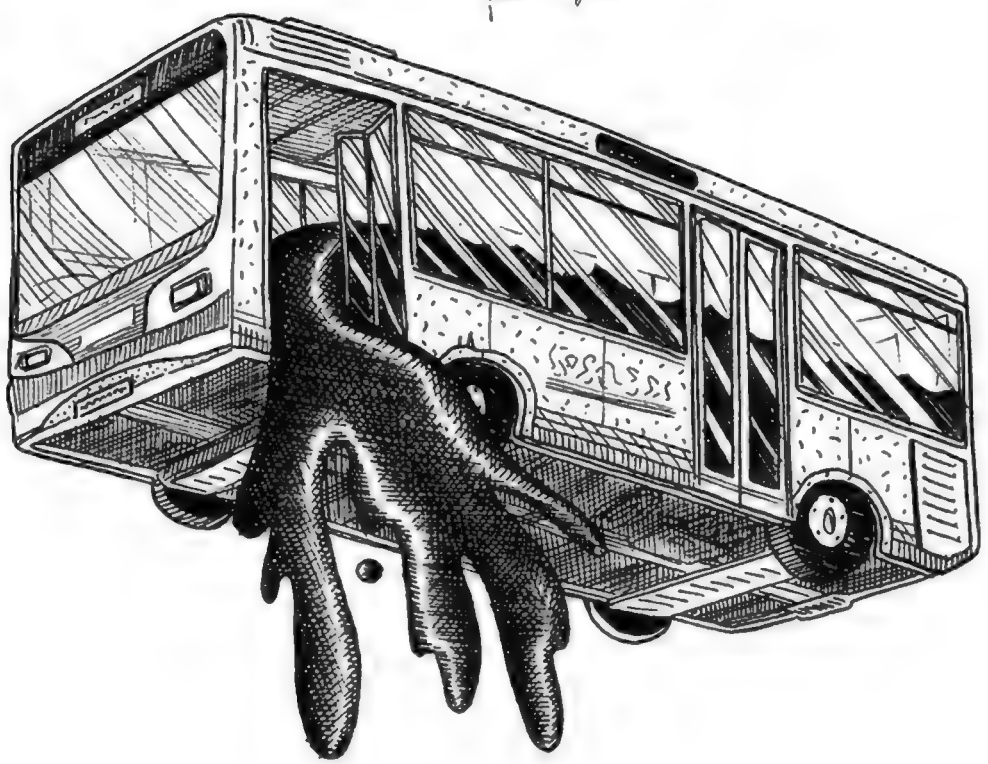
THIS KIND OF SELF-HARM WAS REALLY COMMON IN THE DETENTION CENTRES

EVERYWHERE YOU LOOKED THERE WERE PEOPLE WITH FRESH CUTS AND SCARS UP THEIR ARMS.

I REMEMBER HEARING ABOUT ONE KID

HE CUT HIS HEAD OPEN ON THE WAY HOME FROM SCHOOL





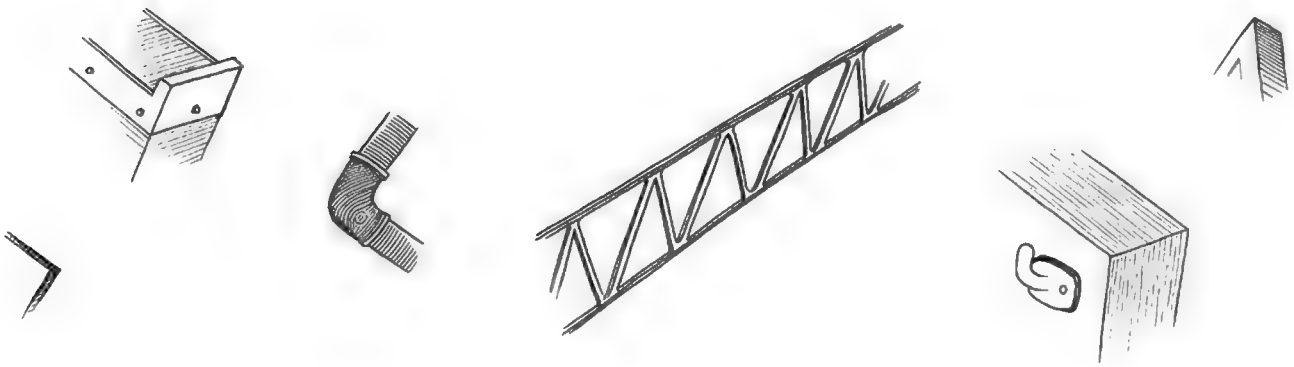
THE SERCO STAFF MEMBER WHO TOLD ME THE STORY WASN'T TOO FAZED

IF I WAS THERE I'D HAVE GIVEN HIM A BIGGER KNIFE

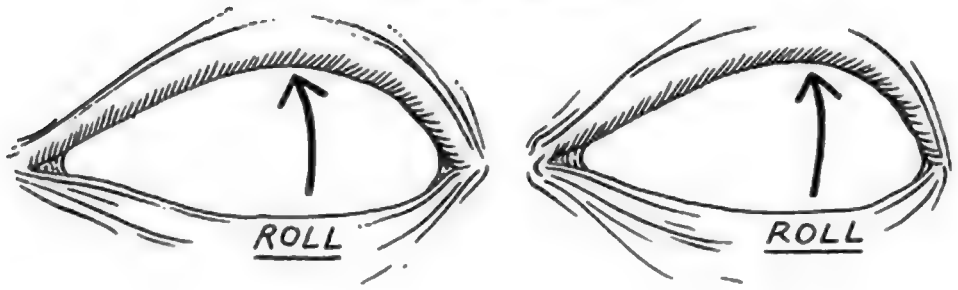
ANOTHER STAFF MEMBER TOOK ME FOR A WALK AROUND THE SITE

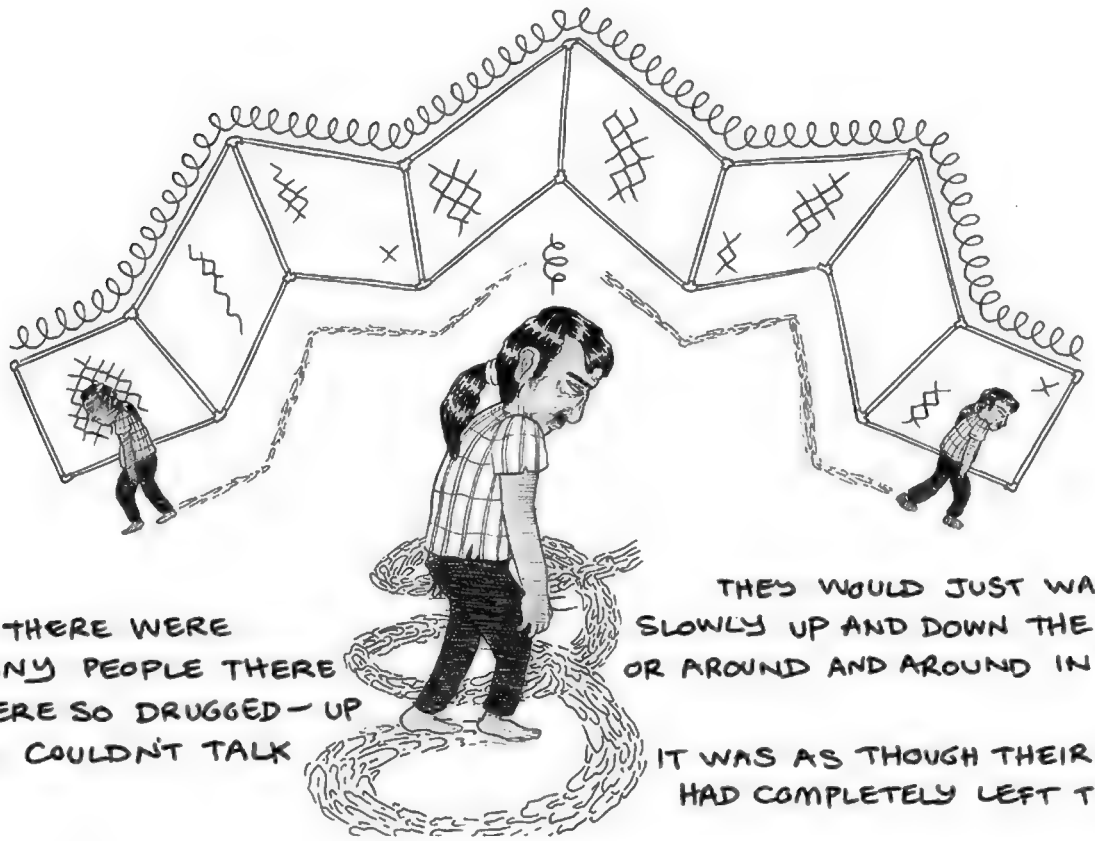
SHE POINTED OUT ALL OF THESE HOOKS AND PIPES AND ANCHOR POINTS ON THE ROOF

I LIKE TO CHECK THESE AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE BECAUSE YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN YOU'RE GOING TO FIND SOMEONE HANGING FROM ONE OF THEM.



THE SERCO ADMINISTRATOR'S ATTITUDE TO PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES WAS HORRIFIC

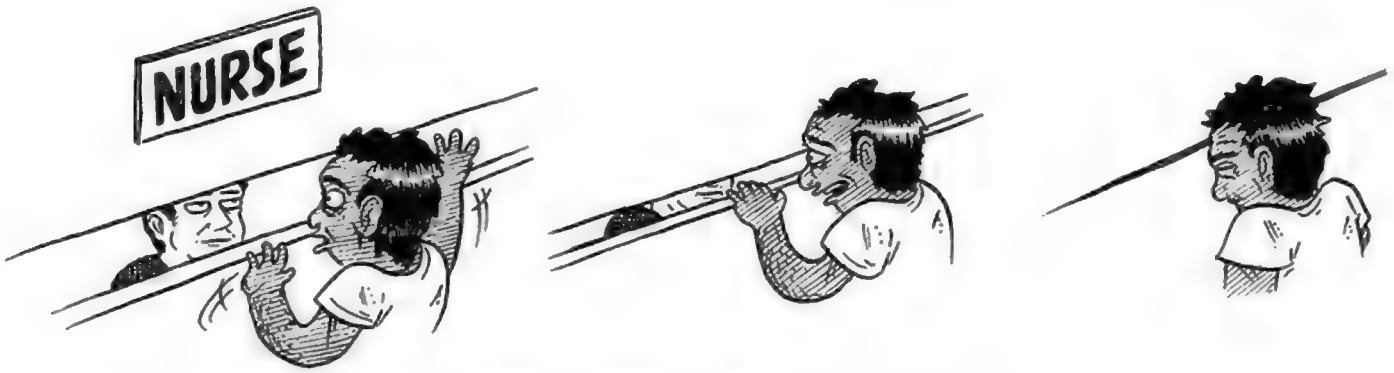




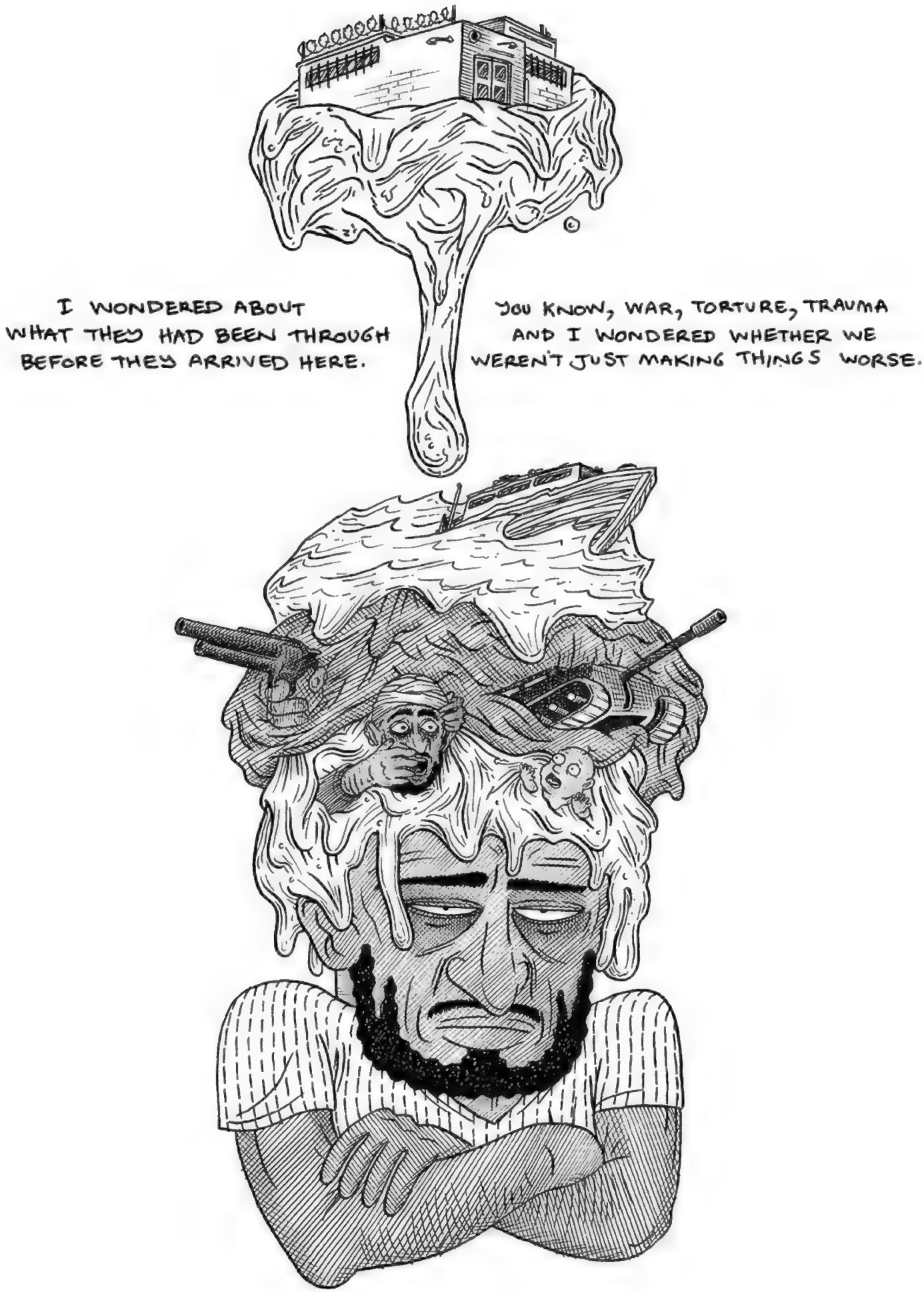
THERE WERE SO MANY PEOPLE THERE THAT WERE SO DRUGGED-UP THEY COULDN'T TALK

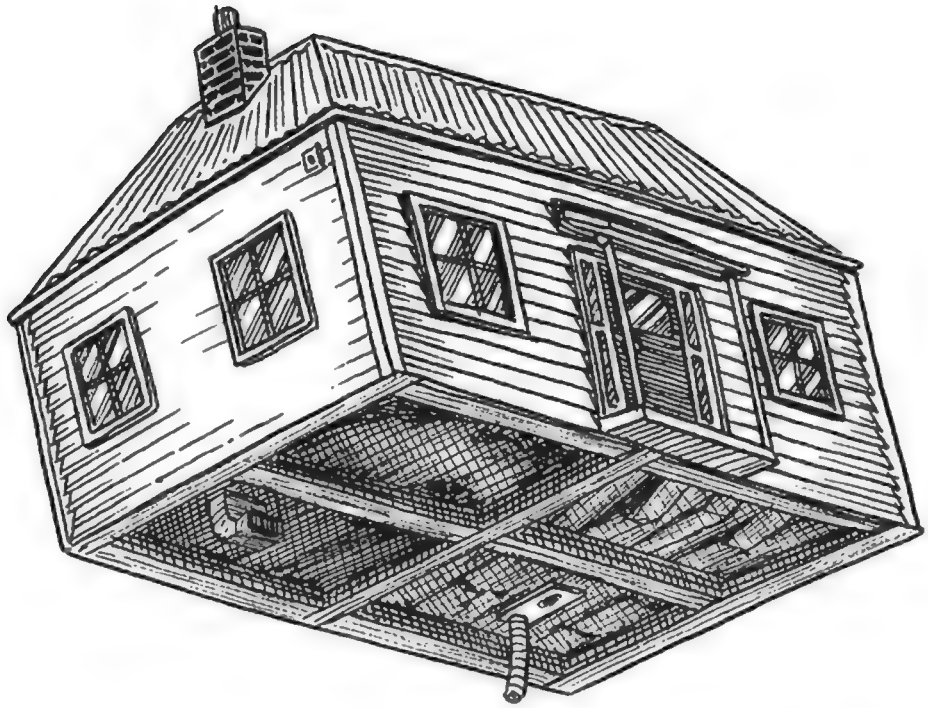
THEY WOULD JUST WALK SLOWLY UP AND DOWN THE FENCE OR AROUND AND AROUND IN CIRCLES

IT WAS AS THOUGH THEIR MINDS HAD COMPLETELY LEFT THEM.



SERCO STAFF SEEMED TO THINK THAT THESE SICK CLIENTS WERE JUST BEING DIFFICULT OR HAD 'BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS'


I WONDERED ABOUT WHAT THEY HAD BEEN THROUGH BEFORE THEY ARRIVED HERE.
YOU KNOW, WAR, TORTURE, TRAUMA AND I WONDERED WHETHER WE WEREN'T JUST MAKING THINGS WORSE.

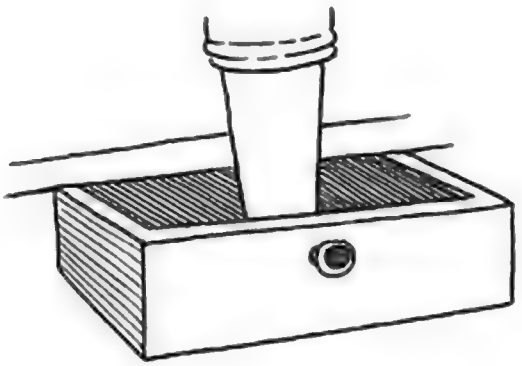


THINGS WEREN'T SO GREAT FOR ME AT HOME EITHER.

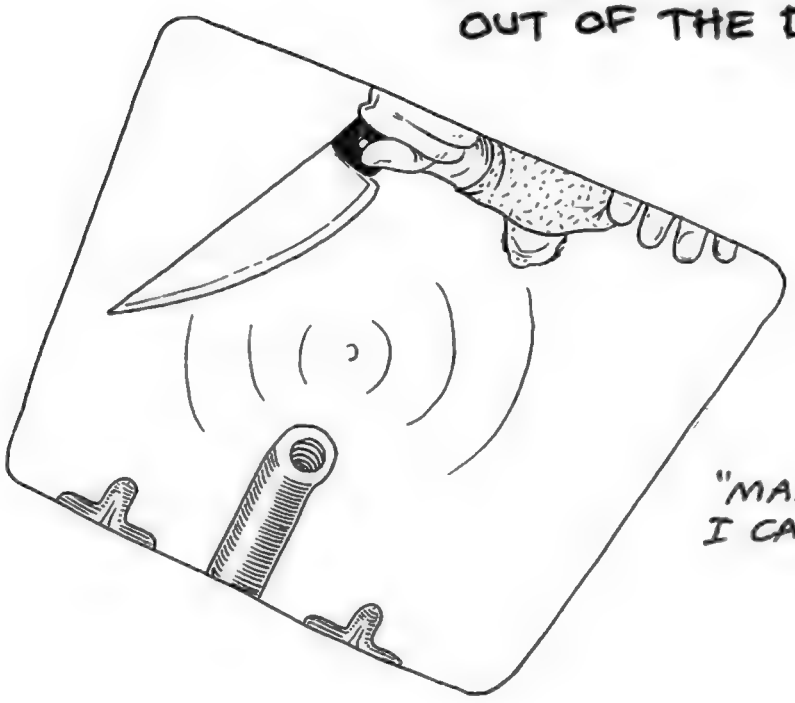
I WAS STARTING TO ARGUE WITH MY PARTNER

ONE NIGHT, AFTER A FIGHT,
I COULDN'T STOP CRYING

I WENT
INTO THE KITCHEN



AND PULLED A KNIFE
OUT OF THE DRAWER



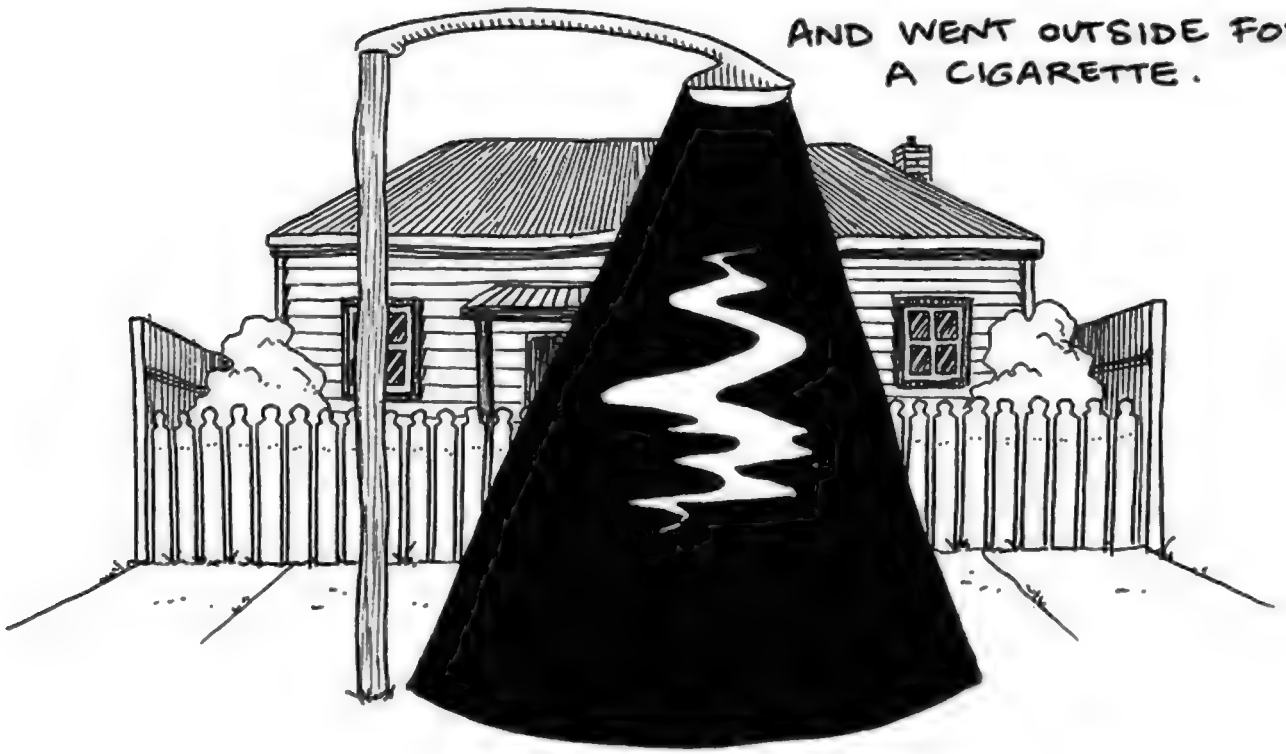
I THOUGHT
"MAYBE IF I CUT MYSELF
I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY
THEY DO IT"

I PUT THE SHARP POINT TO THE SKIN ON THE INSIDE OF MY ARM

I SUDDENLY REALISED WHAT I WAS DOING.

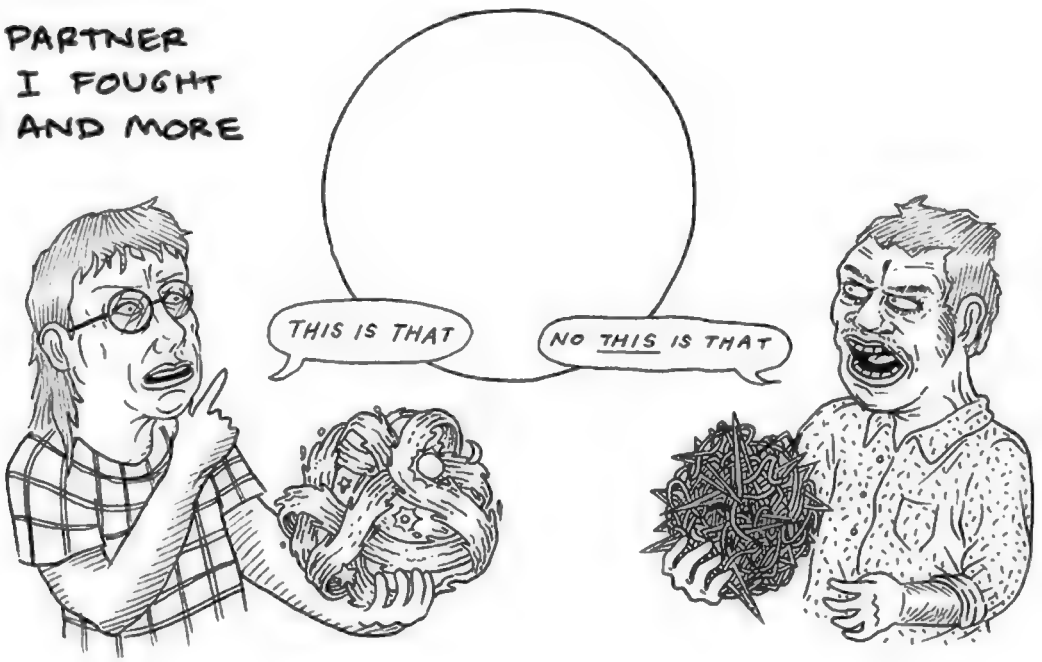
I THREW THE KNIFE AWAY

AND WENT OUTSIDE FOR A CIGARETTE.

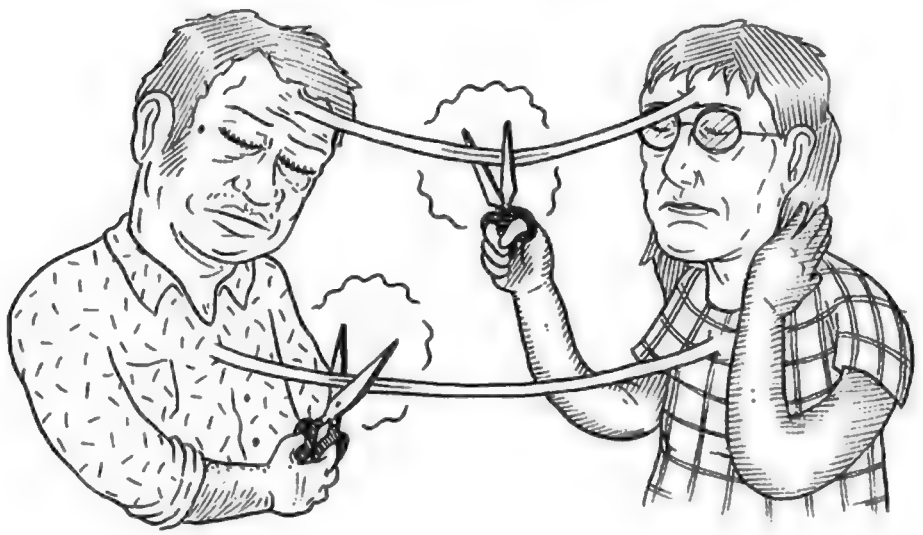


I STOPPED SLEEPING AT NIGHT

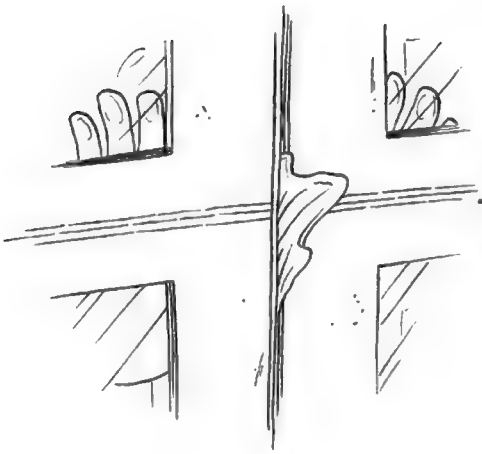
MY PARTNER AND I FOUGHT MORE AND MORE



EVENTUALLY WE BROKE UP



THINGS WERE REALLY SHITTY BUT I KEPT GOING IN TO WORK AT SERCO.



IF ALL THOSE GUYS COULD STAY ALIVE IN THERE, THE LEAST I COULD DO WAS BE STRONG ENOUGH TO TURN UP EVERY DAY TO LISTEN TO THEM.

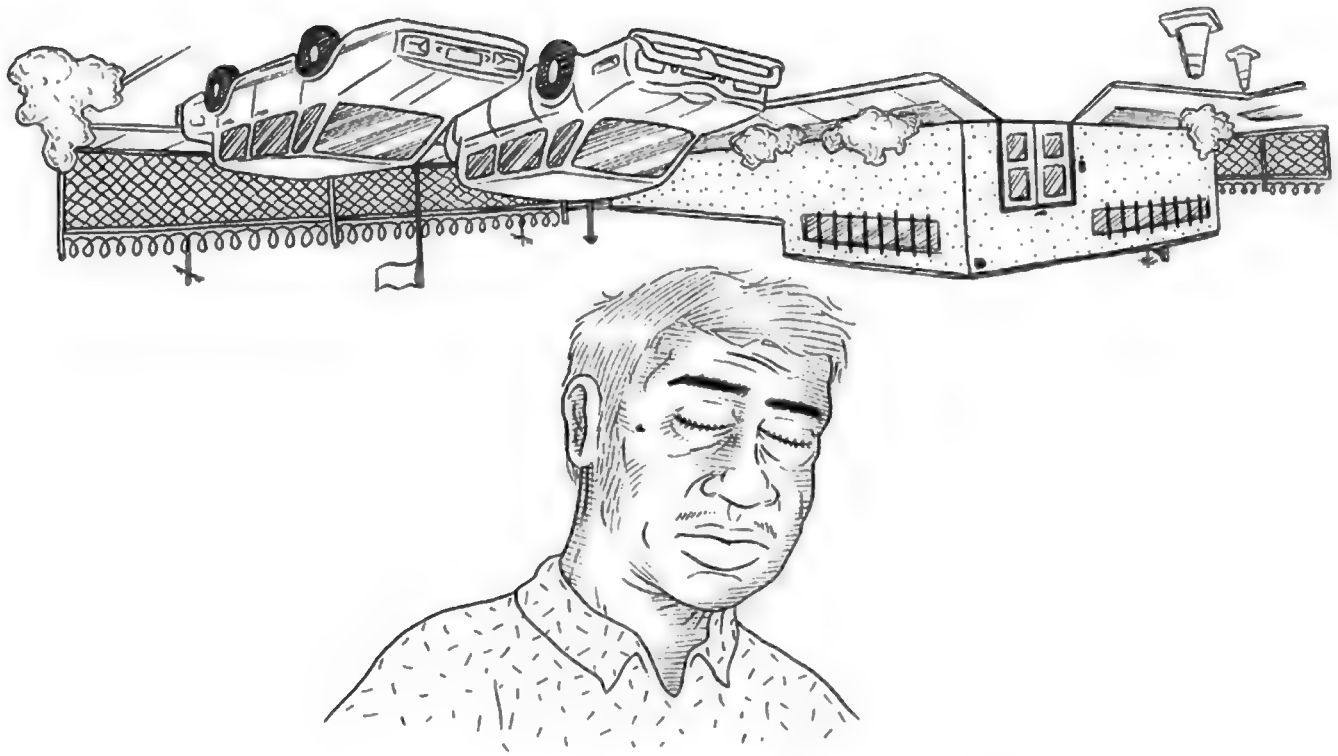
I'VE GOT A LOT OF RESPECT FOR THE PEOPLE THAT WERE STUCK IN THOSE PLACES.

THE THING WAS, NO MATTER HOW BAD THINGS GOT IN THERE, THEY LOOKED OUT FOR EACH OTHER.

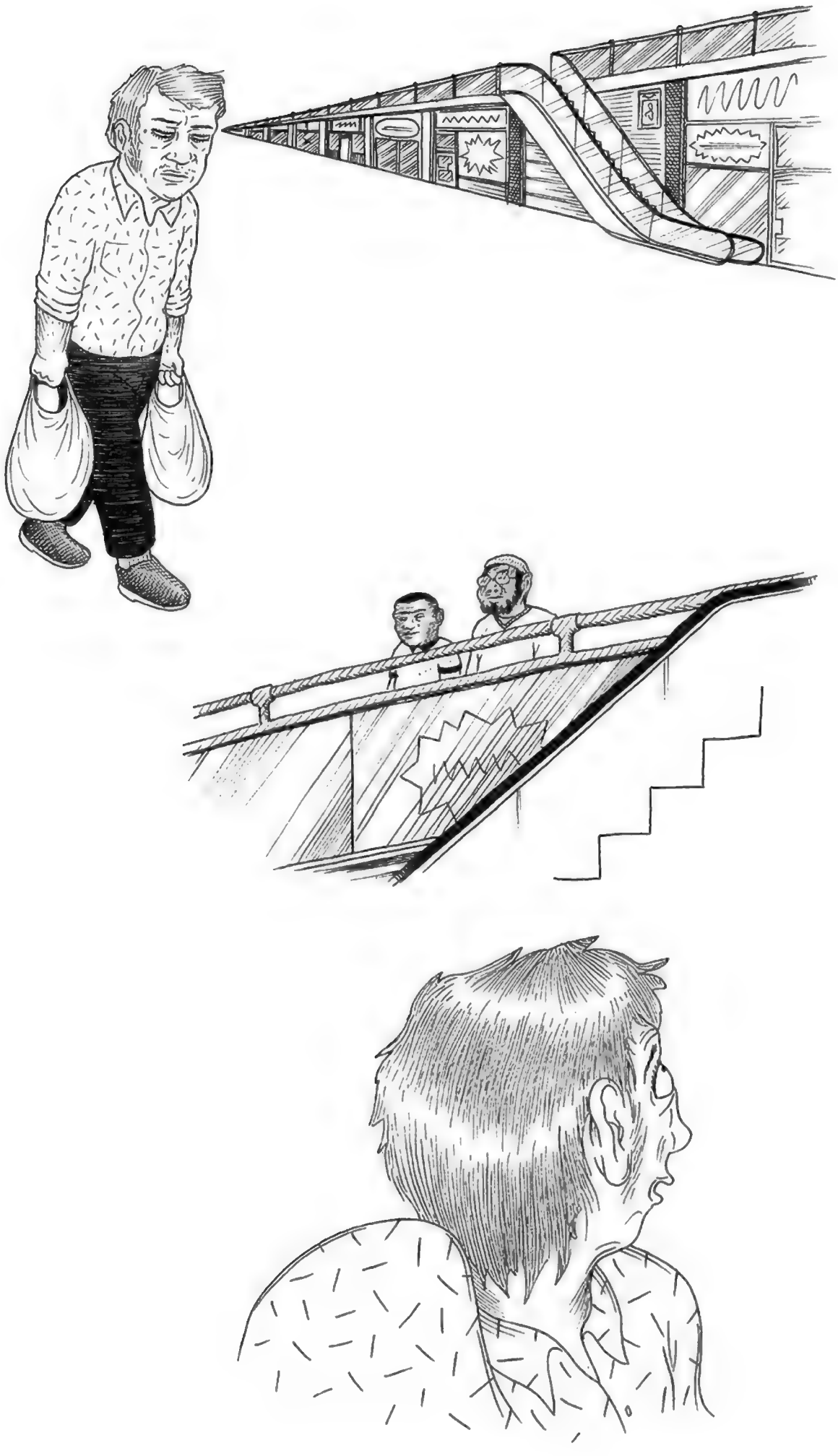
THEY HAD A SENSE OF MUTUAL SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY, WHICH I REALLY RESPECTED.

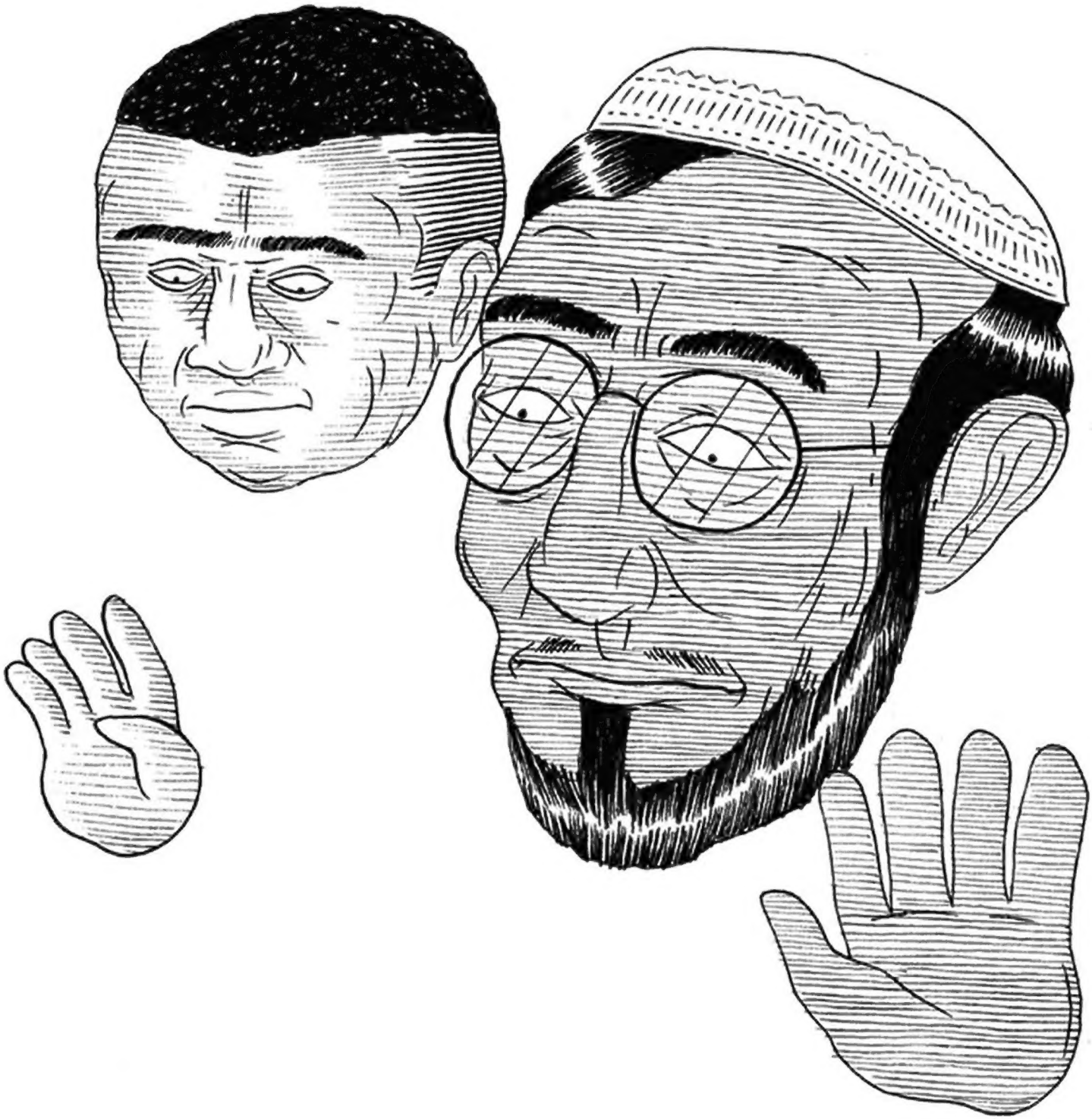
SOMETHING I DON'T SEE VERY OFTEN ON THE OUTSIDE.

BUT EVENTUALLY I GAVE UP MY JOB AT SERCO. THE STRESS WAS TOO MUCH.



NOBODY ON THE OUTSIDE BELIEVED HOW BAD IT WAS IN THERE.





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